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# Checking Out the Jewish Scene in Phuket, Thailand

## Hanging with the Chabad rabbi and eating Kosher Pad-Thai

The Jewish Voice 2 Mar 2018 By: Dan Fellner (AISH.COM)

**Day cruises on the Andaman Sea**  
off the southwestern coast of Thailand, received a phone call every rabbi dreads. Two Israelis were in a Thai jail on drug charges and needed the rabbi's help to bail them out.

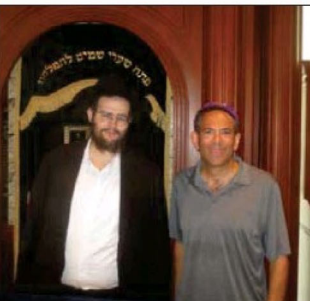
The call came at the worst possible time. Chabad Phuket had a series of events planned that coming weekend in conjunction with the opening of a swanky new \$4 million facility and people were coming from all over the world to celebrate. Rabbi Segal barely had a second to spare. Still, he planned to go down to the police station the following morning to offer his assistance. When you're the only rabbi in a popular tourist destination where there are so many Jewish visitors, it's an unpleasant – but necessary – part of the job.

Then he learned that the two men arrested were actually Arabs with Israeli passports. Should he go, or should he stay and plan for busy weekend ahead? He sought counsel from the chief rabbi of Thailand in Bangkok, Rabbi Yosef Kantor. "And he said, 'Mendy, you go,'" recalls Rabbi Segal. "You have to be a mensch. God wants you to be there."

So Rabbi Segal went down to the jail Friday morning and helped get the two men released on bail. In the process, he met one of their friends, another Israeli named Vadim.

"I started to talk with him and learned his mother is Jewish. I found out the deeper reason I came." Vadim, whose father was Arab, had never set foot in a synagogue before. He was afraid it would





The author with Rabbi Segal

cause tension in the family back in Israel. But after some coaxing from Rabbi Segal, Vadim came to Chabad.

"He put tefillin on for the first time in his life," says Rabbi Segal. "And then he came for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur."

### An American Jew in Thailand

In Phuket on vacation, I recently wanted to learn about Jewish life on the island and check out the new



There are several Israeli-owned businesses near the Phuket Chabad House

Chabad campus, now one of the largest facilities of its kind in all of Asia. I walked 30 minutes from my condo down one of the main thoroughfares in Patong, Phuket's busy tourist hub known for its white-sand beaches, water sports and active nightlife. I had heard Patong was popular with Israelis but had no idea what awaited me as I got within a few blocks of Chabad. There were several signs in Hebrew marking Israeli-owned businesses, including travel agencies, restaurants and car/motorbike rental outlets.

Miracle of miracles, in this island paradise in the Andaman Sea, I found myself strolling through a Jewish neighborhood. Just two blocks from the beach, a "Chabad House Thailand" sign directed me down a side-street lined with parked motorbikes to the six-story building called the Dimenstein Family Campus. But I had made the cardinal sin of forgetting my passport and the guard at the entrance understandably wanted to ascertain that I was telling the truth when I said I was an American Jew and not a potential security threat before letting me inside.

"Can you say the Kiddush?" he asked. Fortunately, I rose to the occasion.

Although I rarely attend services as an adult, my post bar mitzvah

years as the oldest son reciting the blessing of the wine at our family Shabbat dinners back in Arizona came in handy and I quickly launched into the prayer to prove to the guard that I really was a Jew, albeit a mostly secular one. He stopped me well before I got to "borei p'ri hagafen," smiled and nodded for me to go inside.

Upon entering, I was introduced to Rabbi Segal. The 40-year-old Israeli has been leading Chabad's chapter here for nearly three years, along with his wife and co-director, Miriam. Inaugurated this past August – the weekend when the two Israeli Arabs were arrested – the new Chabad Phuket building offers an array of facilities and amenities of which some larger and less transient Jewish communities would be envious.

In addition to a synagogue that can hold up to 300 worshippers, the 26,000-square-foot facility features a mikvah, rabbinical quarters, a social hall that can seat 400 people, and a busy Kosher restaurant that serves everything from hamburgers to Middle Eastern fare to Thai dishes. Kosher meat is imported from Argentina. I tried the padthai, a local noodle dish that was a bit on the bland side. Rabbi Segal explained that Israelis, who make up about 70 percent of the clientele,



Rabbi Mendy Segal on the rooftop of the new Chabad Phuket House

tend not to like their food too spicy. And kashrut law puts limitations on the Israeli chef's use of certain spices.

"Could be the regular padthai tastes better but to make it Kosher, you have to make it in the right way," says Rabbi Segal. Phuket is not a large island. The population is less than 400,000 and it's only about 200 square miles, which makes it less than half the geographic size of my hometown of

Phoenix, Arizona. But more than 5 million tourists visit each year, including a large contingent of Israelis, many of whom fly nonstop from Tel Aviv to Bangkok (Phuket is a 75-minute flight from Bangkok) and spend weeks or even months travelling around the country after completing their military service.

Rabbi Segal says it's impossible to determine how many Jews live in Phuket year-round, although he guesses that it's likely only "a few



hundred. In 2004, a planet was ravaged by an Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. While Indonesia was

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land's hotels and beaches. Many tourists, including young Israeli

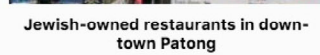
backpackers, were stranded without food, water or shelter. That was the

“They helped not only Jews, but non-Jews” says Rabbi Segal. “They

sleep and to help find Jews who had passed away. The tsunami woke

people up to let them know that this place needed a branch." The new

What's it like to be a rabbi in an island paradise? Rabbi Segal says the demands of the job give him virtually no time to enjoy the weather, scenery and attractions that bring so many tourists to Phuket. "I'm



Kosher pad-thai

When the rabbi does get out into the community, he has found the Thai people warm and welcoming of Jews, with no hints of anti-Semitism. "We respect them. They respect us," he says. "It's something you don't see in different places in the world. They are really nice people." Even though I'm not particularly religious, whenever I travel, I make an effort to connect with the Jewish community – no matter how large or small. There is a sense of comfort derived from being

When I told Rabbi Segal that my visit to the Phuket Chabad Center happened to coincide with my deceased father's 94th birthday, he was kind enough to recite the Kel Maleh Rachamim, a remembrance prayer for the soul of the departed. After reading the prayer in Hebrew, he took the time to explain the meaning behind it in terms I could understand.

There is an old Hasidic saying: "Every descent is for the sake of a future ascent." Such is the case with Chabad Phuket. It was born 14 years ago following a deadly tsunami. It has now ascended to heights few would have imagined possible.

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When the child does get out into the community, he has found that those people warm and welcoming of him, with no sense of self-protection. "We respect them. They respect us," he says. "It's something you don't see in different places in the world. They are really nice people." Even though he is not particularly religious, what he loved, Tinkie said, was to see